

## July 29, 2005- Recreation and Parks Month

### Recreation and Parks Month

I visit our State's parks as often as I can and on Monday, August 1st, I will be at Rotary Park in Huntington for a picnic and project celebration for an exciting addition funded by the Land and Water Conservation Fund project, which is a grant program providing funds for the past 40 years to State and Local Parks and Recreation Directors desperately in need of funding to help them preserve open space and develop recreational facilities.

But before August arrives I want to recognize that since 1985, the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) has annually designated July -- when the summer vacation season traditionally swings into full force -- as "Recreation and Parks Month." The designation fittingly draws attention to public parks nationwide that provide Americans with rich opportunities for leisurely enjoyment.

It is a tradition in our country to set aside special places where citizens can connect with nature. Our public system of parks and recreational facilities is unsurpassed by any other in the world. It is distinguished by the quality of available resources and equipment, the wide array of experiences offered, and, perhaps most importantly, accessibility.

Notably, according to NRPA, 75 percent of Americans live within two miles of a public park or recreational facility, and Americans flock to these special places to relax, play, meditate, and exercise. In fact, NRPA estimates that 192 million people visit our parks and recreational facilities annually.

While most of those visits are the result of short trips by nearby residents, the numbers of families choosing to travel across the miles to enjoy distant parks and recreational facilities has been growing in recent years. The strength of West Virginia's tourism industry can certainly be attributed, in large part, to this trend.

I am a firm believer that the "three T's" - Transportation, Technology and Tourism - hold the keys to future economic prosperity in our region. And our parks in West Virginia are a crucial element of our tourism industry.

Our State has been blessed with extraordinary natural beauty that has made it particularly well-suited to the founding of parks and the establishment of recreational sites. The Creator provided for us breath-taking mountain views, shimmering lakes and ponds, and wondrous geologic formations. As a result, you would be hard-pressed to do much traveling around West Virginia without bumping into a State Park.

Here, among our West Virginia hills, one can find serenity and inspiration. In fact, it would be hard to find anyplace more satisfyingly peaceful than a perch on a moss-covered rock on a forested West Virginia mountainside.

But West Virginia also holds appeal for the more adventurous among us. Here can be found fishing, canoeing, skiing, mountain biking, and some of the best whitewater rafting in America. In West Virginia you can pitch a tent and sleep beneath the stars, or hike along a softly broken trail on the edge of a mountain stream.

Given the array of treasures to be found here, it is understandable that 2.5 million out-of-state travelers would have visited West Virginia's State Parks last year.

From my position as leading Democrat on the House of Representatives Resources Committee, I have been able to help protect and promote some of West Virginia's truly unique places. Not only have I secured federal protections for some special sites - like the New River Gorge and the Monongahela National Forest - but I have helped to ensure federal investment in our state, counties, and cities to promote the establishment of local parks and playgrounds.

Throughout the rest of the Summer weeks, I urge West Virginians to enjoy lunchtime picnics, afternoon swims in our ponds and rivers, and nights camping under the stars.